

Identity politics hinders what democracies need: Chan Heng Chee

Single-issue orientation makes it hard to work with others, says veteran diplomat

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WASHINGTON – Learn tolerance and acceptance, and understand that borders are fluid – that is the advice of veteran Singapore diplomat Chan Heng Chee to young people living in a world of increasing identity politics.

“Multiculturalism (and) multi-ethnicity in Singapore is something that political leaders in Singapore pay special attention to, and they have to keep managing it,” Professor Chan said.

“It is not just a given set of laws or regulations; you have to keep tweaking it, because there are sensitivities.

“Singapore works because the majoritarian population gave up its status as a majoritarian population in its language. It accepted that Chinese would not be the national language of Singapore,” she said.

“This is very, very unusual. And I would say that’s (the late prime minister) Lee Kuan Yew’s political genius.”

Prof Chan, who is one of Singapore’s three ambassadors-at-large, was speaking in *The Straits Times’* Conversations on the Future.

The diplomat, who among other appointments is a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, was addressing the future of multiracial and multicultural societies in a world of increasing identity politics.



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VETERAN SINGAPORE DIPLOMAT CHAN HENG CHEE

In today’s more uncertain and volatile world, young people globally have to deal with the concerns and anxieties of technology transformation as well, she said.

“I would say... really be tolerant, be open, get a good education and some domain expertise, but work

for the good, because working for a good and a sense of mission is much more rewarding than just turning to yourself. Have a purpose larger than yourself.”

On the future of multiracial societies, Prof Chan said: “There are two types of strategies to deal with

these multiracial societies. One is accommodation or integration as a strategy, where you accept every cultural group. They have a right to exist, and you will let them exist and flourish, and... you hope at the end of the day there will be some mixture into something new.

“But you don’t force it... No culture becomes dominant. The different cultures and race groups exist side by side.

“Then there’s assimilation. Other groups coming to the culture are expected to integrate or to embrace the dominant culture. France is that way. Everyone is French. France is race-blind and colour-blind.”

But she added: “Frankly, it doesn’t happen. I’m not a great fan of that kind of assimilation strategy. If you are race-blind and colour-blind, (that doesn’t) address the problems.”

Paris’ banlieues – working-class

enclaves and suburbs populated mainly by immigrants – are an example, Prof Chan said. “Some police do not dare to enter some banlieues. And you still have population segments that feel alienated and rejected by society.”

On the rise of identity politics, she noted that groups which mobilise behind identity in the name of democracy and seek a place, rights and allocations, paradoxically do not help democracy.

“It is a single-issue orientation and democracy makes it necessary to compromise and to work with others,” she said. “And in identity politics, by and large, there’s much less working together. You can see this in the United States.”

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- The Conversations on the Future series focuses not on current news but on broader, and larger, long-term issues and trends. Among the interviewees are Harvard professor Graham Allison, historian Wang Gungwu, science fiction writer Chen Qiufan, Yale law professor Amy Chua and diplomat Tommy Koh.

SCAN TO WATCH
Veteran diplomat on strategies that work for multiracial societies. <https://str.sg/convo17>

